

Lady Be Good Ideology in the success sequence

by Chuck Kleinhans

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"A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."
— Marx, *Capital*

The success sequence in *LADY BE GOOD* shows the song "Lady Be Good" from its creation to its becoming the nation's top song hit. At first glance, the process appears quite simple and straightforward. A song is produced in artistic collaboration, published as sheet music and performed live by various talents. As popularity grows, records are made which stimulate further performances. Finally, radio follows popular opinion and validates the song as number one on the *Hit Parade*. The process presented is extremely ideological: In a general sense operating within the arena of bourgeois ideology, and in a specific sense promoting one particular set of explanations of capitalist mass culture activity. I want to develop a Marxist analysis of this phenomenon by examining three areas: the situation of the music industry in 1941, the nature and function of the hit parade, and the concept of success.

Since *LADY BE GOOD* is set partially within the music industry in 1941 (figuratively in the film's narrative and literally in that both the film and music businesses often overlap within the culture industry), let's consider the historical situation of popular music at the time. An investigation reveals that the actual conditions of music production were different from what the film shows. In the late 30s, the older pattern of Tin Pan Alley songwriting and publication, which focused on sheet music sales and live performance and embodied here in Dixie and Eddie, was forced to change in response to the growth of newer capitalist media such as records and broadcast radio. With the advent of sound film, another factor was introduced that changed the situation further.

"Hit hard, first by records then by radio, Tin Pan Alley was tottering. Hollywood now stepped in and took over many publishers. Warner had the cream. Their Music Publisher's Holding Corporation held the

copyrights to most of the songs of Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Noel Coward, George Gershwin, Sigmund Romberg, and Rodgers and Hart. As a result Warner Bros. controlled a majority of ASCAP's governing board. Together with the publishing companies of the other major studios Hollywood owned the bulk of America's — the world's — popular music. Thus, when radio defied ASCAP In 1939, it was really defying Hollywood."[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

In 1939 the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) formed Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) to challenge ASCAP, which was essentially a monopoly guild of songwriters and publishers. The showdown came when ASCAP announced its 1941 rates for radio broadcast — up 100%. Radio refused to pay the increase, and for ten months no ASCAP songs were played on US radio. Instead the broadcast industry used out-of-copyright works such as Stephen Foster and the newer (and formerly regional) talents of Black and country and western songwriters, now enrolled in BMI. After about ten months ASCAP settled with radio, on radio's terms.

With this brief sketch as background, some facts about LADY BE GOOD become quite interesting. The film's producer, Arthur Freed, was a top ASCAP money maker at the time. He came west from New York with the introduction of sound, wrote numerous songs for MGM musicals in the Thirties, and had considerable revenue from the subsequent sheet music sales and performance licensing of his movie hits. An ASCAP activist, he was honored with a banquet by the organization in the late 30s and participated in ASCAP concerts in 1940, which were intended to build public sentiment for ASCAP in the upcoming battle with the NAB and BMI. At about the same time, Freed bought LADY, BE GOOD from Warner's for \$61,500. (It had been a 1924 Gershwin Broadway musical with Fred and Adele Astaire. Freed kept the title, the title song, and "Fascinatin' Rhythm," and discarded the original book.) Production began February 24, 1941, and Norman McLeod brought the film in on time April 13, though Busby Berkeley's dance sequences were not completed until early May. The film was released September 12. In other words, the film was shot and released during radio's fight with ASCAP and (indirectly) Hollywood.

What are we to make of this information? I believe that if we have it in mind when looking at the success sequence we can see that the film chooses a very particular side, the ASCAP side, in a fight between different groups of capitalists. In large part, the sequence is organized as and functions as fairly direct propaganda. At the same time, I must admit that I'm a little uneasy about having discovered this clear connection between a specific economic struggle within capitalism and a sequence in a Hollywood entertainment film. Isn't this getting close to the kind of Vulgar Marxist interpretation that all Marxist critics are supposed to scorn, ridicule, and denounce whenever possible?

But we must remember that however much we might want to avoid conspiracy theories of ideology in mass culture, in point of fact, there are times when capitalists use the mass media to directly promote their immediate interests. Hollywood's contemporaneous take on World War II provides one example. To

stress the *relative* autonomy of the cultural superstructure still leaves the analyst with responsibility for considering the *actual* relations.

By considering a different aspect of the success sequence, I may be able to make my analysis more sophisticated. Specifically, the sequence's use of *Variety*'s best selling songs and the *Hit Parade* radio program is interesting in light of work done on the Top Ten by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre's interest in examining the Top Ten song hits in the book is part of his analysis of ideology and social organization in contemporary capitalist society. He develops a special vocabulary and set of philosophic concepts; I will somewhat simplify his argument.

Sartre begins by explaining that the *Hit Parade* program in the postwar period had the effect of increasing sales 30% to 50%. A song that made the top ten greatly boosted its sales after being heard on the Saturday night program. In effect, this phenomenon perpetuates the previous week's selections and defines future action for the consumer. If you buy a top ten record after hearing the *Hit Parade*, it is because it has been singled out by an Other. Of course in terms of individual purchasers, people do like what they buy. But to actually prefer the record bought, one would first have to have heard all the other new records.

What we have then is the action of a small group (previous buyers of the record, last week's consumers) extended in time and distance and influencing the present. The propagation of the top selling record list allows individuals to become aware of what they have done as individuals in terms of economic exchange, and also it allows them to become aware of their existence within a pattern of exchange in general. A certain abstraction takes place. The name of the song is connected with its individual quality and this in turn connected with the performers. Thus one hears and buy the "new Stones" or the "new Madonna." Figures for previous sales are transformed into value rankings — quantity becomes quality. A hierarchy of values builds, based on quantitative relations between sales figures, and objective (mathematical) ranking becomes a unified system of values. Everyone then sees the system of values as the expression of collective choice.

This is, Sartre points out, a fine example of alienation appearing as freedom. By purchasing the Top Ten you do not end up with your own preferred music, with a collection that is based on personal aesthetic judgment, but rather you end up with the record collection of no one, the records of the Other. (An experience I'm sure we've all had when we eagerly bought a hot new record and later found we never played it after an initial listening trial.)

We see this process at work in the success sequence, or perhaps I should say we *can* see this process if we choose to understand the sequence in terms external to the sequence itself. Most obviously this reading is reinforced if we connect the rise of the song "Lady Be Good" with the success of Eddie and Dixie. The thinly-disguised ASCAP banquet that concludes the sequence provides the honor, recognition and acclaim that seems to belong "naturally" with the song's becoming number one in the country. Indeed, in the banquet scene Max says that the immense popular success (i.e., sales) demands that ASCAP honor its creators.

Commercial success breeds personal success — a basic element of bourgeois ideology. Thus the film presents, re-presents, the dominant ideology on the level of dramatic narrative, on the level of montage technique, and on the level of explicit character speech.

If we look at success as a general concept developed, elaborated, and made concrete in the success sequence, we find that it can be readily understood. Success joins two things: money and public acclaim. This much is very clear in the sequence. But what is not made clear is how this success can be achieved; the mechanism of success remains a mystery in the film. The film does not show how the system of hit songs operates; it does not produce accurate knowledge about the mass culture industry. But asking for that kind of information and analysis means asking for a radical film, for a Marxist film. One of the most obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the success sequence, and from the film as a whole, is that success is not the result of the rationality, planning, understanding and calculated action usually associated with commercial enterprise. Rather, success is always linked to spontaneity, to accident, to luck. It just happens and no one knows why. Some songs are hits and others aren't. In short, the pop music system operates spontaneously, magically, and mysteriously. In this way too, the film is ideological, conforming to an imaginary concept of capitalism.

LADY BE GOOD rests within the hegemony of bourgeois ideology in many ways. But to get beyond an ideological understanding of success, of the hit parade, or of LADY BE GOOD as an example of mass culture, we must go beyond the film itself. We must understand it existing within history, within society, and within ideology. As Marx argued, a commodity is a mysterious thing. A mass culture commodity, a specific film, can seem especially so, but it is possible to solve the mystery.

Notes

1. Ian Whitcomb, *After the Ball: Pop Music from Rag to Rock* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 119.